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The Rise of Radical Right and Eurosceptic Political Forces and the Impact on the EU's Enlargement Policy

1. Introduction

The rise of Eurosceptic radical right parties across the EU

With war raging on the European Union's eastern border and the bloc seeking to redefine its geopolitical identity, another political transformation is unfolding within: the growing influence of radical right and Eurosceptic parties. Once largely marginalised actors, these forces are now increasingly reshaping Europe's political priorities from within national parliaments and Brussels. This report takes stock of the growing influence of radical right and Eurosceptic political forces within the EU and examines the implications for EU enlargement policy. By shedding light on the developments in several EU member states, this report aims to map the challenges that these dynamics are likely to pose for the rejuvenated momentum on EU enlargement and the prospects of an enlarged Europe.

In recent years, the political landscape of Europe has witnessed a notable surge in radical right and Eurosceptic forces. Fratelli d'Italia in Italy has been in charge of right-

wing coalition since 2022, while some other parties, such as the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), have joined forces with mainstream parties in governmental coalitions.

Beyond direct participation in government, radical right parties exert significant influence by shaping the policy agendas of mainstream conservative and centrist parties. The Sweden Democrats (SD) do not hold ministerial positions but provide crucial parliamentary support to the ruling right-wing coalition, effectively pressuring the government to adopt tougher positions on migration and sovereignty. Similarly, Spain's Vox has acted as a kingmaker in regional coalitions, shifting discourse towards more nativist priorities. These cases highlight how such parties, even in opposition or informal alliances, can push their agendas into the mainstream by compelling traditional conservative parties to shift rightward to avoid electoral losses.

At first glance, the European elections of June 2024 did not significantly shift the balance of power within the European Parliament, as centrist pro-EU parties (European People's Party - EPP, Socialists & Democrats - S&D, and

Renew Europe) maintained their majority with 401 seats, which is enough to advance policies without needing support from parties further to their right.

However, their representation and influence of the radical right in the European Parliament surged in comparison to the past. In the previous mandate (2019-2024), the two Eurosceptic right-wing parliamentary groups held a total of 118 seats. In the new Parliament, there are three such parliamentary groups (European Conservatives & Reformists – ECR, Patriots for Europe – PpE, Europe of Sovereign Nations – ESN) with a combined total of 188 seats, which is just one seat short of the EPP group.

With radical right parties gaining seats and influence, their stance on core EU policies, including enlargement, is becoming more consequential, shaping both public discourse and decision-making at the national level.

What is at stake?

The intersection between the rise of these radical right and Eurosceptic forces and the EU enlargement process is still more important considering upcoming national elections that could see the “balance of power” in the EU institutions shift further to the right. Even though much attention has been paid to these parties’ potential impact on issues like migration and foreign policy, or even their potential reversal of Green Deal policies, their stance on EU enlargement remains underexplored. Understanding their positions on enlargement is crucial, as they could potentially challenge the prevailing status quo and have far-reaching implications for the future trajectory of European integration.

Ultimately, the EU’s readiness for enlargement increasingly hinges not on objective criteria and alignment with the EU *acquis*, but on member states’ ability to reach a political consensus regarding the timing and conditions of enlargement. In other words, political will ultimately outweighs technical or legal aspects. In addition, public support for enlargement in EU member states is another key factor: certain national governments could potentially hold referenda to allow their citizens to decide on whether to accept new members, particularly if enlargement was combined with internal reforms and the further transferral of powers to Brussels.

Thus, evaluating the EU’s political readiness for enlargement and navigating the ensuing challenges requires an in-depth understanding of adverse political developments in member states. This report aims to:

- Understand the interest in, and potential impact of, right-wing Eurosceptic political parties on enlargement policy.
- Explore the avenues and trade-offs they will accept in exchange for their providing support for enlargement.

To that end, analysis has aimed to understand the positions radical right and Eurosceptic forces take on the question of new accessions to the EU and the implications of these stances for enlargement policy. These have been investigated by analysing:

- The views these parties/groups have articulated on EU enlargement in selected member states as well as their key concerns and reasoning underlying their positions on EU enlargement.
- Whether their stance aligns with traditional longstanding national positions on enlargement, particularly in countries like Germany and Austria, which are known for their historical support for enlargement, or France and Netherlands, which are known for their scepticism vis-à-vis enlargement.
- The extent to which these parties challenge or reinforce the existing enlargement agenda, both at the national and EU level.
- Whether these parties converge or diverge in terms of their stance on enlargement.
- Whether these parties’ positions on EU enlargement have also witnessed a shift since February 2022.
- The potential divergence among their positions and/or preferences vis-a-vis the Western Balkans compared to Ukraine and Moldova.

Which countries and political parties?

The report investigates selected member states and parties (in parenthesis their European Parliament party affiliation):

- Germany – Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany, AfD (ESN)
- France – Rassemblement National/National Rally, RN (PpE)
- Italy – Fratelli d’Italia/Brothers of Italy, FdI (ECR)
- Spain – VOX/Voice (PpE)
- Netherlands – Partij voor de Vrijheid/Party for Freedom, PVV (PpE)
- Sweden – Sverigedemokraterna/Sweden Democrats, SD (ECR)
- Austria – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ (PpE)

These countries represent a diverse array of the political landscapes in which radical right and Eurosceptic forces are gaining prominence and could potentially influence

governing coalitions. In Italy FdI leads the governing coalition. In Germany and France, two countries that play a pivotal role in shaping the enlargement agenda, shifts further to the right are also clearly observable in the political landscape.

It is important at this point to distinguish between those national radical right parties affiliated with the ECR group in the European Parliament and those that are affiliated with the PöE and ESN. ECR is considered a “soft Eurosceptic” anti-federalist group which mainly advocates against overregulation, supports the bloc’s intergovernmental model, and has both centre-right and far-right factions.

PöE and ESN are hard Eurosceptic groups, though there are some policy overlaps and alignments between national parties belonging to the ECR and the PöE in certain areas. Certain members of the ECR adopt a more hardline stance vis-a-vis Brussels, for instance, while certain parties in the PöE, including Le Pen’s RN, are appearing increasingly pragmatic by toning down their anti-EU rhetoric.

2. Summarising the positions of key radical right parties

Our analysis has relied on the study of party manifestos, official statements, policy documents available on party websites, the examination of key statements made by leading party figures and senior officials, the mapping of voting patterns in European Parliament, as well as conducting interviews with experts from think tanks and academic institutions in the member states under study. The analysis found that the positions of radical right and Eurosceptic parties on EU enlargement are not uniform. While some firmly oppose any further expansion, others adopt a more nuanced or selective approach based on economic concerns, migration, sovereignty, and geopolitical factors.

The following section summarises the positions and rationale of key parties.

Alternative for Germany – AfD (Germany)

The AfD is strongly opposed to enlargement, with leading party figures framing it as an economic and security threat. AfD rejects the idea of adding more net-recipient states, arguing that it would impose an excessive financial burden on German taxpayers. Enlargement is also strongly linked to migration concerns, with the party claiming that admitting countries from the Western Balkans or Ukraine would increase organised crime and illegal immigration. Foreign policy considerations play a role as well, with the party’s pro-Russian stance leading it to reject Ukraine’s accession outright. Domestically, the AfD also aims to appeal to a sceptical electorate in Eastern Germany, including Russian-German and Serb diaspora communities. It is also one of the strongest opponents of deeper EU

integration, resisting any shift towards Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in EU decision-making.

National Rally – RN (France)

RN firmly opposes enlargement, focusing on both financial and migration-related arguments. It rejects the idea of allocating more EU funds to new, less developed members and frequently links enlargement to increased illegal immigration and organised crime, including potential terrorist risks. The party capitalises on deep-rooted public scepticism in France regarding further EU expansion, using it as a campaign issue to reinforce its broader anti-EU narrative. Like the AfD, it opposes potential institutional reforms that would transfer more power to Brussels, particularly any move towards QMV.

Brothers of Italy – FdI (Italy)

Unlike most of its counterparts, FdI under Giorgia Meloni supports enlargement, albeit with conditions. The party ties its backing to stronger migration control agreements and views EU expansion as a geopolitical tool to counter Russian influence in Europe. Meloni’s pro-Western stance and alignment with NATO further reinforce this position, also part of her aim to boost her diplomatic credentials. Enlargement also serves an economic purpose, as Italy sees itself as a major player in the Adriatic region and stands to benefit from increased trade and investment with the Western Balkans. At the domestic level, supporting enlargement helps Meloni consolidate her leadership within Italy’s right-wing coalition.

VOX (Spain)

VOX maintains a lukewarm and ambiguous stance on enlargement, largely because it is not a priority issue for the party. While some of its MEPs have opposed opening accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, the party has not developed a clear and consistent position on the matter. For now, its electoral strategy remains mainly focused on domestic concerns such as migration and the cost of living, meaning that enlargement does not feature in its campaigns.

Party for Freedom – PVV (Netherlands)

PVV, as a junior partner in the Dutch government, opposes enlargement, particularly for financial and migration-related reasons. The party strongly supports the “frugal” approach to EU spending, rejecting the idea of adding poorer, net-recipient countries that could increase Dutch contributions to the EU budget. PVV also takes a hardline stance on immigration and argues that enlargement would compromise border security by increasing the number of people eligible for free movement within the EU. Ukraine’s accession is explicitly rejected, in line with the party’s broader anti-enlargement position. These views resonate with Dutch voters who are sceptical of migration and the financial impact of EU expansion.

Sweden Democrats (Sweden)

In general, the SD has a more cautious and reserved position enlargement, voicing concerns about financing the less developed states while potentially favouring more economically advanced and "self-sufficient" new members. In addition, party officials are openly sceptic about the candidate countries' ability to secure their borders and prevent irregular migration. Although SD has recently shifted towards a more pro-NATO and anti-Russia stance, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it has not actively pushed for further EU enlargement. However, it is worth noting that, like VOX, its electoral priorities have so far remained largely focused on national issues. Instead, EU enlargement policy is playing only a minor role in the party's discourse. SD has also raised concerns about the EU's institutional capacity to absorb more members, questioning whether an expanded bloc can function effectively given its existing shortcomings in decision-making.

Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)

FPÖ is strongly opposed to enlargement but takes a selectively open stance towards certain countries. It is concerned about the financial implications of admitting additional net-recipient members. It also maintains a hardline anti-immigration position, linking enlargement to border security concerns. The FPÖ has cultivated close ties with Viktor Orbán and echoes his opposition to Ukraine's accession, arguing against the idea of admitting a country at war. However, its position on the Western Balkans is more complex. In recent years, the FPÖ has actively sought electoral support from Austria's large Serbian diaspora (estimated to exceed 250,000 people nationwide), which has influenced its selective openness towards Serbia's and Montenegro's potential accession while maintaining firm opposition to the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

3. Making sense of the challenge: The key strands in anti-enlargement stances

Post-Brexit, exiting the EU or the Euro has become a taboo topic for most radical right parties across Europe. Instead, EU membership now provides these parties with leverage to influence EU policies, particularly in areas such as migration, climate change, enlargement and support for Ukraine. Hungary's Viktor Orbán and his intergovernmental bargaining have demonstrated this new strategy in recent years.

Another interesting trend is the emergence of a new Euro-centric discourse among many far-right parties, which now position themselves as "Defenders of Europe". This includes rhetoric centred on preventing the "decline of Europe" and protecting European civilisation. This is more pronounced in parties like the SD and the RN and less so in the AfD and PVV. Recent studies describe this as "ethnoregionalism": focusing on the interests of the

"European people" within a narrow geographic scope limited to current EU borders.

Despite moderating their anti-EU rhetoric and refraining from questioning the merits of EU membership, the AfD, FPÖ, PVV, and RN continue to oppose EU enlargement, whereas the SD and VOX maintain a more lukewarm or ambiguous stance. In contrast, Fdl is strongly supportive of EU enlargement.

From the above findings, it is evident that there are certain overlaps in their rationales against the accession of new member states. However, our analysis has revealed that not all parties place the same emphasis on the issue of EU enlargement or the EU project in general. The SD and VOX are notable examples: neither has a concrete or well-defined policy on EU enlargement and both lack a coherent and well-articulated stance on the topic. It is noteworthy that in Spain, a significant majority of the population supports EU enlargement, including the accession of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. In Sweden, the population is generally either indifferent or supportive. This contrasts with countries like Austria and Germany, where EU enlargement is a more contentious topic in the public arena.

Overall, these parties' stance on EU enlargement is framed around five main policy themes: a. financial concerns, b. migration and security, c. foreign policy, d. popular support for enlargement and a strategy to win votes, and e. concerns over the functioning of the EU and the place/weight of their respective countries.

Financial concerns

Firstly, these parties oppose the financial costs associated with the accession of economically less developed states. The PVV, for example, centres its tough stance on a strongly "frugal" economic position, arguing that admitting poorer countries would place undue financial strain on the Netherlands and other net contributors. This argument is also cited by the French RN, Germany's AfD, the Swedish SD, and Austria's FPÖ. Notably, all these parties come from countries that are net contributors to the EU budget.

Migration & security

Even though enlargement has not been particularly politicised in countries like the Netherlands, it is intrinsically linked to migration and freedom of movement. This issue is particularly sensitive to the Dutch public and is a key point in the PVV's agenda. In France, the RN links EU enlargement with the risk of increased illegal immigration and organised crime, thus aligning it with its domestic political agenda. Similarly, the AfD in Germany and FPÖ in Austria have consolidated their electoral base with their anti-migration agenda, which is focused on Muslim populations, and by citing the need for cultural preservation. In Austria, the FPÖ has opposed the

accession of countries with significant Muslim populations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Foreign policy

Foreign policy considerations and relations with Russia feature centrally on the stance certain radical right parties have taken to EU enlargement, particularly regarding the potential accession of Ukraine and Moldova. The AfD, for example, maintains a more lenient stance towards Russia and opposes the accession of countries like Ukraine and Moldova. Their anti-enlargement narrative includes concerns about importing ongoing conflicts into the EU, while denying accusations of being influenced by the Kremlin. In contrast, Italy's ruling FdI party has a pro-Western, pro-NATO strategic orientation and is particularly critical of Russia and its ongoing military campaign in Ukraine. By embracing a supportive stance towards Ukraine and maintaining Italy's pro-enlargement position, its leader, Giorgia Meloni, is seeking to legitimise her party on the international stage as a reliable partner in the eyes of Brussels and Washington. Similarly, the Sweden's SD have ramped up their anti-Russian rhetoric following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and have refrained from condemning the potential accession of Ukraine, despite their overall sceptical stance towards enlargement.

Popular support for enlargement and a strategy to win votes

Public opinion and the domestic political landscape are key factors which influence these parties' stances. In countries like Austria, Germany, and France, public opinion is largely against or at best sceptical of EU enlargement. Nonetheless, the ruling coalitions of mainstream parties in Austria and Germany maintain support enlargement. In contrast, FPÖ, AfD and RN capitalise on public scepticism to maximise their electoral gains. Demographics and the politics of the ethnic minority vote can also shape positions on enlargement. In Germany, the AfD strategically formulates its narrative to attract votes by focusing on issues that resonate with their potential target base, which includes Russian Germans in states like Saxony. Additionally, the AfD is potentially targeting Croats and Serbs when it opposes the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This tactic is not unique to Germany's AfD. In Austria, the FPÖ appeals to specific ethnic groups, such as the Serbs in Vienna, by promoting nationalistic sentiments such as "Kosovo is Serbia".

Concerns over the functioning of the EU

RN and several other parties have tried to draw a parallel between a potential enlargement of the EU and the bloc's deepening. The latter could only come about through an EU institutional reform that could potentially include a shift towards QMV in areas like foreign policy. This move is largely framed by Eurosceptic parties as unacceptable member states' ceding decision-making powers to Brussels,

and thus of a potential loss of sovereignty. As explained in the next section, this reasoning has implications not just for EU enlargement, but also for the bloc's broader policy direction in the years ahead. Interestingly, this anti-enlargement argument represents a novel trend that contrasts with the historical stance of anti-federalist forces (e.g. the UK). Such forces have traditionally supported enlargement aiming to dilute closer integration and deeper federalism within the EU. This emerging trend marks a paradox in the history of the EU, reflecting a shift in how pro- and anti-integration actors view enlargement, no longer merely as a tool to resist deeper integration, but potentially as a threat to sovereignty.

4. Implications for EU enlargement

Eurosceptic radical right parties across Europe have begun emulating Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's model to increase their chances of assuming power. For years, Hungary has made effective use of EU processes (e.g. unanimity in enlargement talks) to extract concessions in other areas of perceived national interest. The practice of bargaining at every stage of the enlargement and other policies allows countries like Hungary to "punch above their weight".

Increasingly following this model, radical right and Eurosceptic parties are progressively engaging in the EU public debate, aiming to set their terms and shape policies in various areas. Rather than being purely reactive and outright rejectionist, they now actively participate in deliberations, particularly on migration and climate issues, reflecting a strategic shift towards attempting to influence EU policies from within. This approach has recently helped parties to the right of the EPP to increase their clout, become part of government coalitions and influence the agenda of the government, most notably in the Netherlands.

Against this backdrop, enlargement could be used as a bargaining chip in future negotiations, with Eurosceptic parties potentially leveraging the issue to extract concessions or delay deeper integration measures. As the enlargement process advances, their positions may shift, likely to opposing measures such as extending QMV and treaty changes.

Under the FdI, Italy could potentially also follow in the future a similar path for increasing its influence. As we have seen above, in contrast to anti-enlargement radical right parties, the FdI views the ongoing accession process as a means to bolster Italy's influence both within the EU and the candidate states themselves. Meloni's government has already partly used its support for EU enlargement as a tool for striking migration-related deals, such as outsourcing and accelerating asylum applications to non-EU Albania. Keeping accession candidates in the "waiting room" could be seen as beneficial for striking deals that push migration management responsibilities onto those

countries, especially given the political sensitivity of managing migration and its prominence on the agendas of these radical right parties.

In recent years, Orbán, another staunch anti-federalist, has favoured EU enlargement, at least regarding the Western Balkans, a region where he has cultivated strong ties with local leaders. Having like-minded leaders like Vucic, the Serbian President, in the European Council would enable a “blocking minority” capable of further hindering EU reforms and promoting a “Europe of nation-states”.

Although there has been no decisive alteration in the balance of power at the European Parliament level, where a mainstream pro-EU coalition maintains a fragile majority, radical right parties across Europe have been gaining traction. More significantly, their rise at the national level and involvement in governmental coalitions affect the composition and dynamics of both the European Council and the Council of Ministers, crucial bodies both when it comes to setting high-level policy agendas and adopting EU laws. As EU enlargement largely hinges on political will, it is the Council that ultimately has the determining role.

Public support for EU enlargement is notably lower in Western EU member states where radical right parties hold sway, including France, Austria, and the Netherlands. As the case of Wilders’ PVV in the Netherlands demonstrated, the inclusion of far-right parties in national coalitions can amplify scepticism towards enlargement among the mainstream parties of the ruling coalitions. This could lead to less than fair application of already strict EU enlargement criteria, potentially hampering the accession of certain candidate states, and especially those with significant Muslim populations, and imposing more obstacles for candidate states. Hence, decision-making on EU enlargement could be influenced by the surge of radical right parties, especially as they join governmental coalitions or act as leading opposition forces. Despite softening their rhetoric, most radical right parties in Western Europe remain fundamentally Eurosceptic or anti-EU, opposing the expansion of a Union they criticise. This has significant implications for the future of EU enlargement.

The emphasis radical right parties place on national sovereignty makes them wary of transferring more decision-making power to Brussels and strongly resistant to measures like the introduction of QMV and/or treaty changes. Further enlargement would potentially lead to a Union with over 30 member states; inevitably, this raises questions regarding the governability and efficiency of an already often dysfunctional decision-making structure.

In September 2023, a group of 12 experts from France and Germany published a report commissioned by the German and French governments detailing reforms that were necessary for the EU to accommodate more member states.

Their proposals included inter alia:

- Shifting from unanimity to Qualified Majority Voting in areas such as foreign policy and tax policy, so as to streamline decision-making.
- Increasing the EU budget to address the challenges of a larger Union.
- Potentially reforming the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to ensure adequate financial resources for candidate states and substantially reforming CAP, especially to accommodate Ukraine.

The above proposals suggest that there is a link between the EU’s widening (enlargement) and its deepening. Most of the internal reforms championed by the French-German expert report on EU institutional reform would expand EU’s competences in various policy areas. However, the growing influence of radical right parties could further stall these reform efforts, which have already been challenged by mainstream parties in smaller member states.

According to a paper produced by the secretariat of the EU Council and leaked to the Financial Times in September 2023, the accession of nine more member states could end up costing existing member states over €256 billion, while all member states would have to contribute more to the EU regular budget and receive less from it. It also acknowledged that several existing member states would turn from net recipients to net contributors. As the largest country in the group of nine candidate member states, Ukraine could be entitled to up to €186 billion over the seven years covered by the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with nearly half the funds directed to agriculture, according to the same paper. However, these economic estimates remain provisional and are subject to potential revisions based on factors such as negotiations, shifts in EU priorities, or updated financial assessments. Furthermore, by placing too much focus on the narrow budgetary aspects of enlargement, the discussion largely overlooks the economic, political and/or strategic costs of non-enlargement. Regardless of whether such estimates are precise or tend to omit potential counter-benefits for existing member states, they could be used by Eurosceptic and populist forces to resist further enlargement on economic grounds, as certain parties in our case studies have already done.

If enlargement becomes a more tangible prospect, the opposition from these radical right parties is likely to intensify. The CAP has been a particularly sensitive area in EU policy, and especially vulnerable to misinformation and politicisation. Russian disinformation campaigns, for instance, have sought to create concerns about Ukraine’s future EU membership by sowing doubt over its impact on European agriculture; focusing on the CAP, they have amplified misconceptions. Eurosceptic parties in Western Europe have then echoed these arguments, focusing on the

risks to their agricultural sectors and linking enlargement with broader budgetary concerns. Faced with political pressure from their populations, more enlargement-friendly parties from the “political centre” would be tempted to adjust their agenda accordingly. Again, this is a trend we have seen in other areas of policy in recent years (e.g. migration).

Against this backdrop, a country worth keeping an eye on next year is Czechia. Although it has been a net recipient since its accession to the EU in 2004, it is likely to transition to a net contributor to the EU budget in the next MFF. The country is also poised to hold parliamentary elections during the second half of 2025. The radical right ANO 2011 (which is also a member of the Patriots for Europe group in the European Parliament) is currently leading the polls and could join the future government coalition. As the experience of PVV in the Netherlands has shown, such a development could have the side effect of influencing the ruling coalition to harden its stance on EU enlargement.

Any major decisions impacting the functioning of the EU, including enlargement, still require unanimous agreement from all member states following primarily bargaining between member states. In many cases, certain countries are likely to hold national referenda before beginning any ratification process on expansion. For example, in France, it has been constitutionally required since 2005 that any further accession must be approved by a referendum or a three-fifths majority in both the French Senate and the National Assembly. Even though it is not constitutionally mandatory for enlargement, Austria has the legal framework in place to hold referenda on issues of significant national interest. Even though there are no such constitutional provisions in either the Netherlands or Sweden, Eurosceptic and anti-enlargement parties could apply political pressure for future referenda on the potential accession of new member states, especially as their electoral sway increases. Such referenda could also provide these forces with fertile ground to exaggerate the perceived risks and costs of EU enlargement.

A recent survey conducted across all 27 EU member states by Leuven-based Ipsos on behalf of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies revealed that a substantial majority of EU citizens (65%) support having a direct vote on which candidate states could be allowed to join the bloc. This could serve as a tool for Eurosceptic groups to potentially block any further expansion of the Union. All the above indicate that enlargement is poised for further politicisation in the years ahead, potentially even in member states like Sweden, Finland or Spain where it has yet to feature in the national political dialogue.

The Trump factor

Finally, even though this report has largely focused on internal EU dynamics and the rise of radical right parties

reshaping enlargement discourse, it is important to note that external geopolitical trends, particularly the seismic shifts in US foreign policy, could exacerbate the complexity surrounding EU enlargement. Donald Trump’s return to office could have ramifications for the enlargement process on various levels. For example, the second Trump administration has already adopted a more transactional approach to transatlantic relations, exacerbating US-EU disagreements over NATO funding, trade issues, and the role of multilateral organisations. This might encourage Eurosceptic and nationalist leaders in both EU member and candidate states, providing them with a justification for undermining Brussels’ authority and delaying the institutional reforms required for successful enlargement.

Local nationalist leaders in Western Balkan states, such as Serbia’s Aleksandar Vucic or Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska, could feel empowered to pursue more assertive policies driven by nationalist, secessionist or expansionist agendas. This might include delaying reforms necessary for EU accession or intensifying nationalist rhetoric that deepens internal divisions and heightens regional tensions. Encouraged by Trump’s transactional approach, candidate states may de-prioritise reforms in governance, the Rule of Law, and democratic standards. Leaders might view alignment with US interests as a counterbalance to EU conditionality, reducing incentives to adhere to stringent EU criteria.

Ukraine and Moldova’s EU accession pathways are heavily reliant on Western unity, and the US-EU partnership in particular, being sustained. The second Trump administration has already threatened to withdraw its support for Ukraine to pressure Kyiv to agree to a peace deal, after Washington unilaterally kicked off direct peace talks with Russia, without involving its European partners. President Trump’s focus on bilateral deals and his unwillingness to provide security guarantees, could weaken EU confidence in the long-term security framework needed to integrate these states.

Radical right parties in member states could exploit Trump’s reduced commitment to Ukraine to argue against EU enlargement in favour of Realpolitik. They might frame Ukraine and Moldova’s accession as a financial burden and a security risk, reinforcing their opposition to their accession. Consequently, the European public, influenced by radical right narratives, might question the feasibility of integrating Ukraine and Moldova due to the high economic and political costs associated with their accession.

At an electoral level, these parties could also exploit a Trump-aligned geopolitical environment to enhance their domestic and European credibility. By associating themselves with Trump’s nationalist rhetoric and policies, they could appeal to voters disillusioned with traditional pro-EU parties.

Alternatively, radical right parties in member states could

align their agendas with nationalist Western Balkan leaders, potentially lobbying for weaker EU oversight of accession criteria. Simultaneously, such shifts may decrease the EU's clout over aspiring states, hampering efforts to bring them into line with the Union's democratic, legal, and economic criteria. This could prompt Brussels to emphasise short-term geopolitical stability over the EU's normative commitments to democracy and the Rule of Law. In this scenario, the threat of a less cohesive EU reacting to external forces may accelerate the politicisation of enlargement across different member states.

The growing influence of Eurosceptic parties emboldened by external geopolitical shifts could also obstruct necessary institutional reforms within the EU. Without such reforms or revising budget contributions, enlargement would face additional politically sensitive obstacles, further delaying integration.

The path forward

Overall, the impact of radical right parties at the national level, particularly in the European Council and the Council of Ministers, can significantly shape high-level policy decisions, including those related to enlargement. The rise of these parties presents a significant challenge, as enlargement intersects with other critical issues such as migration, the Common Agricultural Policy and cohesion policy, all of which are particularly sensitive to their voter base and have substantial budgetary implications for the EU. These parties are therefore likely to oppose the necessary reforms and deeper integration associated with enlargement. Additionally, more mainstream parties with an official pro-enlargement stance might be tempted to follow suit to avoid losing votes to these radical right parties.

Given the current electoral trends, radical right parties will likely continue in the coming years to influence both national and European politics. Therefore, monitoring their impact on EU policy and the broader European project will be crucial. Balancing enlargement with internal reform will remain a challenge. This evolving political landscape will pose a significant test to the EU's ability to balance enlargement against the required institutional reforms, potentially making new accessions a more contentious and politicised issue in the coming years. The interplay between internal EU dynamics, external pressures, and the growing influence of Eurosceptic forces is poised to shape the trajectory of enlargement in increasingly complex and contested ways.

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
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Publishing department

Dialogue Southeast Europe

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Disclaimer:

This publication is based on a report originally produced by the South-East Europe Programme of the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), as part of the [think nea – New Narratives of EU Integration](#) initiative, supported by the Open Society Foundations – Western Balkans. For full findings and analysis, please see the complete report [here](#).

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July, 2025
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